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The YANKEES CAPTURE YORK

MILO M. QUAIFE

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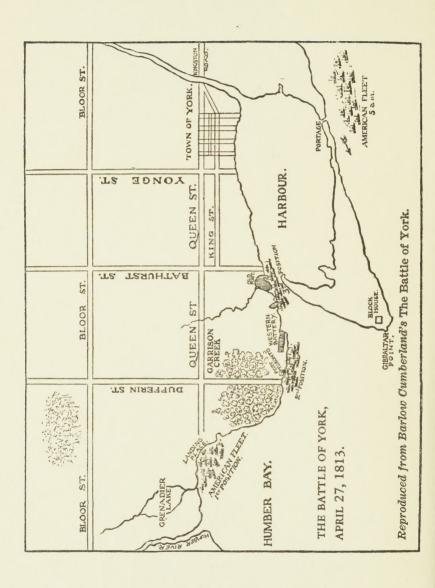
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The YANKEES

CAPTURE YORK

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MILO M. QUAIFE

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THE CASS LECTURES

Father Gabriel Richard, 1950 Stanley Pargellis
The Importance of Being in Earnest, 1951
Raymond C. Miller
Yankees in Wonderland, 1951 Frank Woodford
Exploration Unlimited, 1953 R. Darwin Burroughs
Local History is Living History, 1953 S. K. Stevens
The Yankees Capture York, 1955 Milo M. Quaife

THE CASS LECTURESHIP

"The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the advisability of organizing a Detroit Historical Society to work in conjunction with the Burton Historical Collection and the Michigan Historical Society. We will visit the Burton Library."

Thus read the call to "a number of Detroit men known to be historically minded" to attend a meeting in the clubroom of the new Public Library on December 15, 1921. From that initiatory meeting the Detroit Historical Society has grown, slowly at first but steadily, in both membership and program, into an organization of wide community influence and service.

The Annual Cass Lecture represents one phase of the Society's program which exemplifies an original purpose of the organization. The Lecture Committee has this year further identified its program with that of the founding group by selecting as the lecturer for 1954 one who for two decades served as secretary and editor of the Burton Historical Collection. The place of the lecture was appropriately the Hall of Industry of the Detroit Historical Museum—itself the realization of the vision and labor of the members of the Detroit Historical Society.

The Cass Lectureship was established to encourage research and to present each year to the members of the Society scholarly reviews of subjects of historical or significant current interest which might be published as contributions to the records of the Society and distributed to historical libraries. The lectureship was named for Lewis Cass, the distinguished first president of the Historical Society of Michigan, thereby recognizing a filial relationship to the original society and paying tribute to a great pioneer in the recording and preserving of our heritage.

MARQUIS E. SHATTUCK
Chairman, Cass Lectureship Committee

FOREWORD

In 1924 Dr. Milo Quaife came to Detroit to become secretary and editor of the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library. The selection of Dr. Quaife to give the Cass Lecture of 1954 was in recognition of his service to the city in more than a quarter century of historical research. Appropriately, messages of felicitation came on April 5 from historical societies and editors with whom he had been associated. Tributes came from publishers and librarians and from the Mayor of the City and the Governor of the Commonwealth. The Common Council of Detroit and the Senate of the State Legislature adopted resolutions of appreciation of Dr. Quaife's service to Detroit and to Michigan. Particularly fitting was the preparation of a bibliography of his writings by his friends in the Algonquin Club of Detroit, an historical group which he had served as president.

Milo Milton Quaife was born October 6, 1880, in Nashua, Iowa, where he attended public schools. He received his bachelor's degree from Grinnell College and his master's degree from the University of Missouri. In 1908 the University of Chicago awarded him the Ph. D. degree.

Prior to coming to Detroit, Dr. Quaife was successively professor of history at the Lewis Institute of Technology, Chicago, and superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. He is the author of several books dealing with mid-western American history, among them histories of Wisconsin, Michigan, Chicago, and Detroit. Since 1916 he has edited the annual volumes of early Americana published as the Lakeside Classics Series, and during the 1940's he edited the ten volumes comprised in the American Lakes Series.

From his research in the Burton Collection, Dr. Quaife drew material, heretofore overlooked, for the reappraisal of a chapter in early American history which holds particular interest for Americans of this region and their Canadian neighbors.

ARTHUR DONDINEAU, Superintendent Detroit Public Schools, Former Member of the Board of Trustees of the Detroit Historical Society.

THE YANKEES CAPTURE YORK



THE YANKEES CAPTURE YORK

N THE morning of April 27, 1813, an American army and fleet assaulted York (now Toronto), the capital of Upper Canada. By late afternoon the place had been taken and its defenders were either captive or in flight. About three hundred American soldiers (among them their leader, General Pike) were dead or wounded, and much of the public property, including buildings, naval vessels, and stores, had been destroyed. The American occupation continued for almost a week, during whose course some further destruction of public and private property took place, including the burning of the two wooden Parliament houses. Somewhat over a year later a triumphant British army visited Washington and burned the Capitol and other public buildings, avowedly in retaliation for the prior

destruction of the Parliament houses and other property at York.

The inhabitants of conquered cities are in no condition to view with philosophic calm the conduct of their conquerors. It is no matter of surprise, therefore, that the conduct of the victors both at York and Washington gave rise to contemporary recriminations. The lapse of almost a century and a half, however, should afford historians time enough to render their considered verdict. Apparently they have done so; but before we proceed to examine it, we need to note that there is a vast difference between the historical problems which the hostile occupation of the two cities presents. At Washington the British applied the harsh rule of lex talionis, and no one questions the destruction they perpetrated or the motive which animated it. At York, on the contrary, the American commanders denied emphatically that their army and navy ever committed the destruction which has since been attributed to them. There is no uncertainty or debate, therefore, concerning the destruction inflicted at Washington; while the question of what really happened at York still invites our examination.

Before we proceed with it, it will be enlightening to take note of the treatment accorded the affair by the historians of the two nations. History is not written in a vacuum, and historians, like other people, are influenced by patriotic and cultural points of view. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Canadian writers have commonly agreed in accusing the Americans of gross misconduct at the taking of York. One notable exception to this generalization, however, is presented by Professor W. B. Kerr, whose study, "The Occupation of York (Toronto) 1813," published in 1924, describes the conduct of the American army in markedly favorable terms.¹

When we turn to the narratives of American writers in the natural expectation of finding some off-setting details which tend to soften or refute the Canadian indictment, we are surprised to discover that they merely repeat the Canadian tale of American disgrace and dishonor. Ordinarily, when the testimony of all parties to a conflict is in agreement, we reasonably conclude that the truth has been elicited concerning the affair. For the honor of American scholarship, if not that of the American army, one might wish that such a conclusion were justified in the present instance. That the contrary is true and that American scholarship with respect to the capture of York is one with the presence of snakes in Ireland will become apparent in my further discussion.

Other accusations aside, the height of injury charged upon the American army is the burning of the Parliament buildings, and it was this accusation which chiefly motivated the British burning of the American Capitol and other public buildings the following year. Until about the year 1890 American writers commonly admitted the burning of the Parliament houses by our army, frequently seeking to extenuate the act by citing the provocation created by the explosion of the powder magazine and the discovery of a human scalp reputed to have been on display behind the Speaker's chair in the Assembly chamber.²

But with 1890 we come upon a significant development in the American treatment of the issue. The sixty-year period which then began spans almost the entire development of critical historical scholarship in America; and Henry Adams, whose *History of the United States from 1801 to 1817* is still our standard authority for the period it covers, is universally regarded as one of the ablest American historians. Volume VII of this work was copyrighted in 1890 and it must have been in preparation during the years shortly preceding this date. In it, after describing the expedition against York, the assault, and the capitulation, the learned author continues:

"The ship on the stocks was burned: the ten-gun brig *Gloucester* was made prize; the stores were destroyed or shipped: some three hundred prisoners were taken; and the public buildings including the houses of Assembly were burned. The destruction of the Assembly houses, afterward alleged as ground for retaliation against the Capitol at Washington, was probably the unauthorized act of private solders. Dearborn protested that it was done without his knowledge and against his orders."

As authority for his statements, Adams cites a short letter of General Dearborn, October 17, 1814 (in Niles Register, VIII, 36). One can only wonder why he should do so, when Dearborn's much more detailed defense of himself and his army, fortified by the testimony of both American and British officials, might just as readily have been cited.3 But wonderment increases when on examining this letter of Dearborn's one finds that it contradicts, categorically and emphatically, practically every statement the great historian has attributed to it. Dearborn affirms "in the most explicit manner" that no private or public buildings were destroyed by the American troops, excepting two blockhouses and one or two sheds belonging to the navy yard. On the contrary, he placed a strong guard over the town, with positive orders to prevent any depredation upon the inhabitants. And before the Americans departed, Chief Justice Scott wrote a letter thanking them for their humane treatment of the townsmen and Dearborn for his own attention to the safety of Canadian property and persons. The

frigate on the stocks and the naval storehouses were fired by the enemy, while several valuable public buildings connected with the military establishment were destroyed by the explosion of the magazine; and despite "strong provocation" no other burning of the town was perpetrated by the army or navy.

If a college freshman, writing a weekly paper in American History I, should thus misuse his underlying authority, the instructor would justifiably doubt his capacity to pursue the course with profit. The scholarly prestige of Henry Adams is so high, however, that probably few readers have ever thought to question the accuracy of his account. Certainly few subsequent historians have done so, for down to the present moment they have commonly copied or paraphrased his statements and today these are being taught as historical truth to our hundreds of thousands of high school and college students throughout the land.

One early reader who promptly copied Adams' statements was the historian of the American people, Professor John Bach McMaster. The fourth volume of his massive eight-volume work was copyrighted in 1895, but since volume III was copyrighted in 1891 and McMaster's account of the capture of York occurs on pages 42-44 of volume IV, it is fair to presume that it was written soon after Adams'

book was published. It bears a striking resemblance to Adams' prior account.

"The British gave up the town," writes McMaster, "which the Americans proceeded to destroy. They burned one ship on the stocks, made prize of the brig *Gloucester*, sent off such stores as they wanted, destroyed the rest, and set fire to the two houses of Assembly. Happily this shameful act was done by some private soldiers acting without authority, was denounced all over the country, and was publicly disavowed by Dearborn."

Like Adams, McMaster cites as his authority Dearborn's letter of October 17, 1814, and like Adams, he contradicts practically everything Dearborn wrote that letter explicitly to assert. Like Adams, McMaster ignores the much completer statement which Dearborn prepared for the public and printed in the November 4, 1815 issue of Niles Register. But he outruns Adams in stating that the Americans destroyed the town, that the "shameful act" of burning the Parliament houses was done by some private soldiers, "acting without authority," and that it was denounced by the press all over the country.

"It is the curse of evil deed That it must, constant, evil breed."

The chorus of denunciation of the conduct of our army at York initiated by Adams and McMaster has

been repeated by their successors until the present time; and no fact of history seems more firmly fixed in the American mind than that the destruction perpetrated by the British at Washington was amply justified by the prior American destruction of York.

Historians Garner and Lodge, writing in 1906, dispose of the subject in a single sentence: "The operations were distinguished by the advance of the Americans upon York in April, 1813 and the burning of part of the town, wantonly, as the British historians have charged."

Kendric C. Babcock's Rise of American Nationality, 1811-1819, also published in 1906, and volume V of Wiley and Rines' elaborately annotated elevenvolume history of the United States issued in 1912 likewise follow the Adams-McMaster version, and like their predecessors cite General Dearborn's letter of October 17, 1814 as authority for their statements.

One of America's most distinguished historians was Professor Edward E. Channing. Volume IV of his monumental *History of the United States*, published in 1917, twice alludes to the burning of York, and each time holds the American army responsible for the destruction. Describing the assault, and the explosion of the magazine, he says: "This disaster incited the Americans to vengeance and led to the destruction of the Capitol of Upper Canada and other buildings." Although Channing gives no au-

thority here, in his subsequent account of the burning of Washington "the latest and the best of the British writers" is cited as stating that it was done deliberately as a direct reprisal for the burning of the hamlet of Newark and the village of York in Canada.

Since no American historian has arisen since 1917 to alter the chorus of admissions of wrong done by the American army at York, we may confine the remainder of our review to a few characteristic citations. Louis L. Babcock, whose War of 1812 on the Niagara Frontier appeared in 1927, affirms that there was much looting of private property, besides the burning of the two Parliament houses, and that it is "evident the troops got out of hand" despite efforts of their officers to restrain them. He also justifies the destruction committed at Washington for the same reasons other historians give.6 In volume V (published in 1934) of the great ten-volume History of the State of New York, edited by A. C. Flick, Professor Julius Pratt of the University of Buffalo, writing of the affair at York, succinctly affirms that the Americans "destroyed the public property, including the houses of Parliament of Upper Canada."7 Two standard recent American histories of college textbook grade are Professor H. C. Hockett's Political and Social History of the United States (1929) and S. E. Morison and Henry S. Commager's Growth of the American Republic (1937). Both books narrate briefly the capture of York and both reiterate the familiar charges of American destruction.⁸

In 1940 J. T. Frary published They Built the Capitol, devoted to an historical and descriptive account of the Capitol at Washington. In it the author sharply denounces "the senseless burning of Washington's buildings" by the British in 1814, which he characterizes as an inexcusable act of vandalism. For this he was promptly taken to task in a review of his book published in the January, 1941 issue of the American Historical Review. "Mr. Frary calls it 'absolutely senseless,' " wrote the reviewer: "This is hardly justifiable when it is recalled that in the previous year our army had crossed Lake Ontario, destroyed the capital of Upper Canada, and burned its Parliament buildings."9 The American Historical Review is the most distinguished historical periodical in the world and the official organ of the American historical profession. Its editors scrutinize every offering admitted to its pages, yet they found no reason to blue pencil the statements I have quoted.

Francis F. Beirne's book, *The War of 1812*, published in 1949, entitles Chapter 14 "We Too Burn a Capital." Note that the last word of the title ends in *al*, signifying the city or town and not *ol*, signify-

ing the Capitol building. Beirne's chapter, much too long for present quoting, repeats the general run of earlier statements: Because of the explosion of the magazine the Americans were in a vindictive mood; they not only destroyed the military objectives, but some unknown person or persons set fire to the public buildings, which were burned to the ground. The Americans did not condone this act of vandalism, but they advanced the excuse that some of their men had become infuriated at finding a human scalp on the wall of one of the buildings. It is noteworthy that Beirne says nothing concerning the destruction of any buildings other than the public ones, and thus his chapter completely fails to justify the startling assertion made in its title.

To bring our survey of American scholarly opinion down to date it only remains to cite the 1952 edition of Professor John D. Hicks' school text book, entitled *The Federal Union:*

"In April, 1813, General Dearborn led a successful raid on York . . . later known as Toronto. During this episode American soldiers wantonly set fire to the two houses of the provincial parliament, an act which their officers deplored but which later gave the British an excuse to burn the government buildings at Washington in retaliation."

Professor Hicks is an outstanding present-day scholar, yet his recital discloses no material change

from the 1890 version of Henry Adams. Fortunately for the repute of the American army, however, there is abundant contemporary evidence concerning its conduct. Much of it has been conveniently assembled in Canadian General Cruikshank's Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Niagara Frontier in the Year 1813. Instead, therefore, of rehashing the caricatures of scholarship authored by Professors Adams and McMaster, let us reconstruct the story in the light of the contemporary documents, which both they and their disciples have until now ignored.

The American fleet of more than a dozen ships, bearing an army of 1600 men, sailed westward from Sackett's Harbor at the eastern end of Lake Ontario. Its approach to York was signaled the night of April 26, and from early dawn of the 27th it was in plain view of the town. The morning was calm; and slowly, as if in review, the floatilla passed westward across the harbor front toward the landing place which had been selected, near the site of the old French fort, some two miles west of the village. Save for the early uncertainty as to the intended landing place, there was no element of surprise, and British Major General Sheaffe had ample time to concert his arrangements for defense.

Available for this purpose were three hundred regular soldiers, a like number of militia, and a small

force of Indians, who in the actual battle proved of but slight account. Although the invaders greatly outnumbered the defenders, the odds were by no means hopeless, nor the issue of the combat a foregone conclusion. The Americans had to land on an open beach in the face of hostile fire, overpower two fortified positions, and then drive the defenders from the town itself. In the heat of battle almost anything can happen; but given a brave and skillful defense, York might well have remained in British possession and another American defeat have been registered. The factors which wrought its downfall were chiefly these: the skill and determination of the Americans and the sorry blundering of General Sheaffe, whose conduct not only procured his own defeat, but the maximum of misfortune for the captured town.

The intended landing place of the invaders became obvious to the British as soon as the fleet passed Gibraltar Point. Detailed instructions governing the landing operation had been issued in advance, and these deserve careful scrutiny. The troops were exhorted to be mindful of the honor of the army, and of the disgraces which had recently tarnished its reputation. Private property must be sacredly respected, and the death penalty was promised to any soldier who should be guilty of plundering the townsmen.¹¹

Although General Dearborn commanded the army, General Zebulon Pike had obtained permission to command the landing force. Young and energetic, and with a distinguished record of achievement as an explorer, his request represented the attitude of younger men in the American armies who had been humiliated by their many failures and enraged by such spectacles, witnessed in recent weeks, as the British looting of Ogdensburg on February 22, where the jail had been emptied of its prisoners, the public buildings fired, and almost every house in the village plundered.¹²

The place of honor as the leader of the landing party was assigned to Major Benjamin Forsyth's company of green-coated riflemen, who had vainly fought to defend Ogdensburg against the British attack of February 22. As the riflemen sprang from their boats and mounted the bank, they encountered the York County militia and three companies of regulars, one of them the Grenadier Company of the King's Own Regiment, "as fine men as the British army could produce."13 The riflemen promptly faded into the nearby forest, where from behind trees and fallen logs they poured a withering fire upon their bewildered opponents. It was another Braddock's Defeat in miniature. With their comrades falling on every side, the Grenadiers could not even locate their foemen, or whence the deadly

gunfire came. Three-fourths of their number were quickly shot down, and the remainder turned in retreat.¹⁴

Additional forces came up and the Americans advanced slowly, their progress retarded by the stubborn opposition of the British and by the difficulty of moving their artillery over the swampy ground and across the unbridged rivulets. The British made a stand at their foremost or "western" battery, where some of the cannon from the *Duke of Gloucester* had been stationed, and the Sixteenth United States Regiment moved forward to the assault. At this juncture an accidental explosion of the battery's artillery dump (not to be confused with the subsequent and far greater explosion of the powder magazine) so weakened the defenders that they abandoned the position and continued their retreat.

General Sheaffe now gathered his forces in the fort, and a considerable lull in the fighting ensued. The Americans advanced slowly and deliberately, as if anticipating an overture for a surrender. Instead of this, Sheaffe withdrew from the fort toward the town, having first arranged to blow up the magazine, containing five hundred barrels of gunpowder, in the face of the advancing column.¹⁵ The destruction wrought by this explosion was appalling. A great amount of stonework was blown heavenward, to descend with deadly effect upon the American line.

Even in this act the general blundered, for the magazine was touched off too soon to wreak the maximum damage upon the enemy, while about forty of Sheaffe's own men had not found time to withdraw far enough to escape being engulfed in the ruin.

The explosion of the magazine marked the close of the day's fighting. Although one-sixth of the entire American army was struck down by the falling debris, the confusion wrought in its ranks was but temporary.16 Since General Sheaffe made no effort to take advantage of it but instead continued his withdrawal into the town, considered as a military maneuver, the explosion proved wholly useless. But it served to enrage the victorious soldiers and their resentment was further increased by the events which immediately followed it. General Sheaffe retired into and through the town and, having concluded that further resistance was futile, set out with his remaining regular soldiers for distant Kingston, leaving the militia behind with orders to make such terms with the enemy as they could.

Had he done nothing more, it would have been well for all concerned. Having turned over the command and given orders for the surrender, Sheaffe proceeded to fire the naval storehouse and the uncompleted 30-gun ship and vainly endeavored to burn the *Duke of Gloucester*. While Major Allan and Colonel Chewitt of the York County Militia

were in the midst of the negotiation with the Americans over the terms of surrender an American officer burst into the room with the information that the ship and the naval stores had been set on fire after the flag of truce had been accepted and the discussion of terms of surrender had been begun. The angered American negotiator denounced this as an act of perfidy and stated that he would not proceed with the capitulation. To this the embarrassed Canadians could only reply that the destruction had been undertaken without their orders or desire and acquiesce in the American condemnation of General Sheaffe's conduct in ordering it.17 After much further altercation between the two parties the terms of capitulation were formally signed; but by now the advancing column of the American army was at hand, and the harassed Major Allan was seized and carried into the town as a prisoner.18

With the town in actual possession of the American army and the projected capitulation repudiated, the Canadians were in a distressing plight, presently accentuated by the assignment of Forsyth's riflemen to patrol the town. Canadian hopes of generous treatment sank to the nadir. Militia officers, privates, and such townsmen as could be seized were marched back to the fort, where the officers were paroled until morning and the others were confined for the night.

On the morning of the 28th the negotiations were resumed, the Canadian wounded remaining unattended meanwhile, and the officers and privates confined in the fort. Hours passed, marked by bickering and delay and by mounting distress and anxiety in the breasts of the Canadians. During this interval the Reverend John Strachan, who had appointed himself a spokesman for the townsmen, demanded to be taken to General Dearborn, who was still aboard the fleet. Before a boat could be obtained for this purpose, the General and Commodore Chauncey themselves came ashore, and the doughty Reverend, having been introduced to Dearborn, began the recital of his demands, only to be rudely cut short. The General was likewise in an angry mood and, charging Strachan with false statements, bade him to desist, since the General had more important matters to attend to. Nothing daunted, Strachan now turned upon Commodore Chauncey, saying that he had done business with greater men without being insulted and accusing Dearborn of the "miserable subterfuge" of wishing to delay the capitulation until after his troops should have had time to pillage the town; after which, he proceeded to the barracks and informed the captive militia officers to expect only the worst of General Dearborn, who instead of ratifying the articles had "insulted their negotiation." Hardly had this report

been delivered when the General entered the garrison; the Canadian spokesmen were admitted to a fresh conference with him, and the much-discussed articles of capitulation were taken up and ratified without further difficulty; following which, the Canadian militia were paroled and permission was given to remove the sick and wounded.²⁰

The capitulation thus finally agreed upon²¹ provided for the surrender of all the public stores to the victors; civil officers were to retain their posts, surgeons in attendance upon the wounded were not to be considered as prisoners of war, and the sanctity of private property was guaranteed. From the late afternoon of April 27 until the morning of May 2 the American forces occupied the town;²² from the afternoon of April 28 on, the capitulation was in effect. The events of this interval of four days and four nights are chiefly responsible for the persistent charges of misconduct and violation by the Americans of the terms of capitulation.

Shorn of details, the charges may be reduced to two: that public property, especially the Parliament houses, was destroyed and that the homes of townsmen were entered and private property was confiscated. Each of these charges must be considered in some detail, since neither admits of a categoricial affirmation or denial.

To clarify the situation, some general comment is

necessary. For the province of Upper Canada, the War of 1812 was a civil war, as truly as was the American Revolution for the original thirteen colonies. Save for Kingston and the Detroit River area, Upper Canada had remained a wilderness until the closing years of the American Revolution. Between 1780 and 1812, three contrasting streams of immigration poured in; a relatively small trickle of British immigrants from overseas; a much larger tide of despoiled American loyalists; and, particularly in the opening decade of the nineteenth century, a still larger flood of Yankee home-seekers from south of the international border.²³

Throughout the war, therefore, Upper Canada was filled with American sympathizers, thousands of whom had removed thither within recent years for purely economic reasons and who anticipated with pleasure a return to American rule. An appreciable number of them were actively disloyal; a much larger number remained outwardly loyal, while secretly desiring the triumph of the American cause. At York, as elsewhere, this American element was numerously represented, and its members improved the opportunity presented by the British defeat and the temporary paralysis of the local government to wreak such destruction as they could upon the hated administration.

It was unfortunate that after the collapse of the

negotiations for surrender on the afternoon of April 27, Major Forsyth's riflemen were left in charge of the town, for their recollection of the outrages recently perpetrated by the British at Ogdensburg readily rationalized their urge to retaliate upon the townsmen of York. To what extent they violated the article of capitulation guaranteeing the sanctity of private property cannot be precisely stated. It is clear, however, that they indulged in some looting and that they made but little effort to restrain others from the same practice. It is equally clear that they were joyously abetted by numerous disorderly townsmen, who proceeded to act "as if there were no law,"24 while the prisoners whom some one set free from the jail proved no laggards in helping on the good work. News of what was going on quickly spread to the adjoining countryside, and many of the rural dwellers poured into town to obtain their share of the plunder.

The local officials, faced with this anarchical condition, appealed to General Dearborn to issue a proclamation upholding their authority, which was promptly done.²⁵ At the same time assurance was given that any reported misbehavior of the soldiers would be properly dealt with; a detachment of the Twenty-first United States Infantry was assigned to protect private property, and any householder who

requested it was given a special guard of two or three soldiers.²⁶

Such, briefly sketched, was the state of partisan strife and disorder when on the morning of Friday, April 30, the Parliament houses were found to be on fire. Despite the unanimity of Canadian and American historians in charging the Americans with setting it, there is no convincing evidence to support the charge, and there is much inherent probability that it is baseless. Such stout-hearted British spokesmen as the Reverend John Strachan, Major Allan, Colonel Chewitt, and Judge William Dummer Powell have recorded their testimony. They were not overawed by the invaders, and they had not hesitated to complain, freely and volubly, of the things they deemed amiss.27 From the nature of the case, these men must have known, or at least strongly suspected, whom to hold responsible for this act, yet no single word of local contemporary evidence imputes it to the Americans. In view of the circumstances, this silence is fairly tantamount to an admission that they did not believe the Americans were responsible for the burning. At this late date it seems improbable that the precise truth will ever be certainly established. Save for the inferential evidence I have noted, it is readily conceivable that some American soldier or sailor may have fired the buildings; but all the probabilities point more

strongly to some embittered anti-administration Canadian or one of the evacuated jailbirds as the perpetrator. If it was done by an American at all, it was the lawless act of an individual soldier perpetrated in defiance of the strongest possible orders, and hence stands in quite a different category from the destruction officially ordered by Admiral Cockburn along the American sea coast and by General Ross at Washington.²⁸

With no further military objective to achieve at York, General Dearborn was anxious to be on his way to Niagara. Unable to transport all of the public supplies he had captured, he destroyed some and gave the remainder to the poor of the town and vicinity.²⁹ For understandable reasons he burned two military blockhouses and "two or three sheds" at the Navy Yard, which General Sheaffe had not found time to destroy. These acts, clearly allowable as military measures, comprise the only destruction designedly committed by the American army at York.³⁰

When other towns are to be captured, the townsmen may well pray for such oppressors as General Dearborn and Commodore Chauncey. Apart from the destruction which war and invasion necessarily entail, they committed no act of aggression at York. The misconduct of the rifle company, however regrettable in itself, constituted a rather mild form of oppression and no personal violence was inflicted

upon any one. If the townsmen felt themselves seriously wronged by the Americans they took a strange way of expressing it. Chief Justice Scott wrote a letter to General Dearborn commending him for his humane and honorable conduct,31 and even the pugnacious Dr. Strachan, who seems to have possessed a special talent for arousing animosity, joined with other local leaders in signing a statement extenuating such violations of private property as the troops had committed. "After . . . we had time to reflect," they wrote, "we must acknowledge that they behaved much better than we expected, and if it had not been for the misconduct of the troops at Ogdensburg, many of them told us that there would have been little or no depredation committed here."32 So circumspect was the conduct of the Twenty-first Infantry, stationed as an additional guard over the town after complaints had been made to the American commander, that when, a few months later, Captain Pelham of this regiment was captured by the British at Chrysler's Field, his captors, on learning his identity, released him on parole in recognition of his generous conduct as commander at York.

The giving of public supplies to the needy townsmen, the payment of an exorbitant price for an old privately-owned vessel, the prompt response to the appeal of the local authorities for support in quell-

ing the lawlessness of their own fellow citizens, all stamp General Dearborn as a remarkably mild military conqueror. The suffering inflicted by the Americans upon the townsmen of York pales to insignificance in comparison with that inflicted upon the people of Detroit by General Brock and his successor, General Procter. In line with ancient military custom, Brock sought to break the will of General Hull by threatening his inability to prevent a general massacre if compelled to take the city by storm.33 Following the surrender, his Indian allies indulged in wholesale and, for the most part, senseless, looting and destruction of private property, and the general did nothing to restrain them. The rule of General Procter became progressively arbitrary and oppressive, leading eventually to the wholesale expulsion from the community, in midwinter, of many of the leading citizens. For all these things more or less extenuation can be found; I mention them merely by way of suggesting the unfairness of pillorying for more than a century the vastly less exceptionable conduct of the Americans at York.

Considered as a military exploit, the spectacle of the army's condemnation by its own national historians is no less remarkable. The record of achievement of the American armies in the War of 1812 is sufficiently dolorous, as all students of this period know. The expedition against York stands out as one of the few brilliant American achievements of the entire war. The rival naval forces on Lake Ontario were engaged in a seesaw battle for supremacy; and merely to transport an army the length of the lake, disregarding the danger of destruction by the opposing fleet, was an act of great boldness. Arrived at York, navy and army cooperated perfectly in the highly difficult operation of landing the latter on a hostile shore in the face of determined opposition. Once landed, the army moved as remorselessly as an Alaskan glacier to the attainment of its objective, which the fleet afforded important assistance in achieving. If any trace of jealousy existed between the two arms of the service, it cannot be detected in the records of the respective commanders. Although the town of York in itself was of negligible military value, the destruction or capture of the military and naval stores collected there, and of the vessels wintering or under construction in the harbor, was of utmost importance to the further progress of the American armies. No one would seriously rate Dearborn and Chauncey as great military leaders, but their conduct of the expedition against York stands out in marked contrast to the general story of American inefficiency in the war.

To sum up: the town of York was never destroyed, either by the Americans or any one else. Its military works were mostly destroyed, largely by

British General Sheaffe, but to less extent by General Dearborn. Save for the burning of the ships and the naval storehouse by Sheaffe, no blame attaches to either commander for such destruction. The article guaranteeing the sanctity of private property was violated to some extent by the Americans, and to a greater extent, probably, by criminal or disloyal Canadians. Save for the military works and the Parliament houses, no single building was destroyed in the town. No local contemporary charge was made that the Americans fired the Parliament houses, and such evidence as exists points strongly to the conclusion that the act was perpetrated by the Canadians themselves. Insofar as the destruction committed at Washington was based upon alleged prior American destruction at York, it was without justification. Finally, it is far from creditable to the American historical profession that for two generations its foremost spokesmen have been content to repeat, in more or less detail, the amazingly untrue statements of Henry Adams and John B. McMaster concerning the conduct of the American army at York, without troubling to examine for themselves the abundant and easily available contemporary evidence.84

NOTES:

- 1. The Canadian Historical Review, V (March, 1924), 9-21.
- 2. See, for example, Samuel Perkins, History of the Late War... (1825), p. 249; J. T. Headley, The Second War with England (1853), I, 212; B. J. Lossing, Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812 (1868), p. 591; James Schouler, History of the United States Under the Constitution (1881), III, 411; Rossiter Johnson, History of the War of 1812-15 (1882), p. 104.

Various Canadian writers have sought to ridicule the significance which the Americans attached to the finding of the scalp. Commodore Chauncey supplies the clearest contemporary evidence concerning it in his report to the Secretary of the Navy, May 5, 1813 (in the Historical Register of the United States, 1812-13. Part II. II. 221). In this, he presents to the Secretary the British standard, "accompanied by the mace, over which was hung a human scalp. These articles were taken from the Parliament House by one of my officers and presented to me. The scalp I caused to be presented to General Dearborn, who I believe still has it in his possession." See also General Dearborn's statement of May 3, 1813, to the Secretary of War (in E. A. Cruikshank, Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Niagara Frontier in the Year 1813, Lundy's Lane Historical Society Publications, Part I, 1813 (1902), p. 186). The contrary evidence appears in a statement in Robert Gourlay's Statistical Account of Upper Canada, published in 1822 (in Cruikshank, op. cit.), which cites a statement of a member of Parliament "who was acquainted with the circumstances," to the effect that the scalp had been sent by an army friend to the Clerk of the House, who, disgusted by the gift, threw it "into an under drawer of his table" where it was "probably" found by some of the sailors, who imposed upon their officers the story that it had been suspended on the wall.

3. In Niles Register, IX, 159-62. In a subsequent

footnote Adams cites Dearborn's official report to the Secretary of War, April 28, 1813 (in American State Papers, Military Affairs, pp. 442-44). This supplies a more detailed account of the battle, but of necessity it contains nothing on the conduct of the American army following it.

- 4. James W. Garner and Henry C. Lodge, History of the United States (1906), II, 746.
- 5. C. P. Lucas, Canadian War of 1812 (1906), pp. 229-33.
 - 6. Pp. 81 and 142.
 - 7. V, 233.
- 8. Hockett, op. cit., p. 322; Morison and Commager, op. cit., I, 317.
- 9. The reviewer continues with this comment: "It may have been bad policy on the part of the British general, but it certainly was not senseless, when no effort worth mentioning was made by the government in the way of defense." This seems to mean that absence of effective defense justifies the commission of acts of aggression.
- 10. Quoted with the permission of Houghton Mifflin Company, the publishers.
- 11. In Cruikshank, op cit., pp. 162-63. For a convenient description of the battle, with an excellent map, see Barlow Cumberland, The Battle of York . . . (1913), 32 pp.
- 12. See Franklin B. Hough, *History of St. Lawrence* and *Franklin Counties*, *New York* (1853), p. 627 ff. Most of the looting was perpetrated by "abandoned persons" from Canada, supplemented by numbers of dissolute Americans, and their conduct was deplored by responsible British officials.
- 13. P. Finian's narrative, in Cruikshank, op. cit., p. 208.
- 14. Ibid., pp. 176, 180, 187, 193, 203. Forty-six of the Grenadiers were slain and thirty wounded in a

total of about one hundred men. It is axiomatic in military circles that soldiers will not ordinarily sustain a battle loss in excess of 25 per cent of the numbers engaged; the loss of the Grenadiers in the opening moments of the battle was practically three times as great.

- 15. Various Canadian apologists have stated that the explosion of the magazine was accidental, but the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming. General Sheaffe himself expressly stated that he planned it, and numerous contemporary witnesses support his statement.—See documents in Cruikshank, op. cit., pp. 176, 188, 190, 192, 195, 206, 212.
- 16. The American loss in the actual battle was 14 killed and 32 wounded; by the explosion, 38 were killed and 222 wounded.—Cruikshank, op. cit., p. 183. Numbered among the fatally wounded was General Pike, who was crushed by a falling stone as he was questioning a Canadian militiaman.
- 17. See narrative signed by Major Allan, Colonel Chewitt, and others, in Cruikshank, op. cit., pp. 196-97. Here, fitly, General Sheaffe exits from our story, as he did from the town, without even bothering to take with him the royal standard, which pillowed General Pike in the moment of death and which today is preserved as a military trophy at Annapolis.
- 18. What happened to Colonel Chewitt, or why he was not made prisoner, does not appear. The Reverend John Strachan voluntarily accompanied Major Allan, although no American constrained him to do so.
- 19. Cruikshank, op. cit., p. 198; A. M. Bethune, Memoir of the Right Reverend John Strachan . . . (1870), p. 48.
- 20. Although the Canadians were offended by the course of the negotiations, justification of General Dearborn's attitude is not difficult. The Reverend Mr. Strachan was obviously an untactful diplomat; General Sheaffe's action in firing the ships and naval stores

after the negotiations for surrender had been entered upon was a gross breach of good faith; the consequent anger of the American authorities was wholly natural, and General Dearborn's subsequent ratification of the articles, without imposing any additional penalty upon the townsmen, discloses a degree of liberality which is notably absent from present-day European methods of warfare.

- 21. See Cruikshank, op. cit., pp. 164-66.
- 22. The fleet continued to lie in the harbor until May 8, awaiting a favorable wind for departure; during this latter period the town was, of course, under potential American control, although actually none was exercised.
- 23. Michael Smith, A Geographical View of Upper Canada . . . (1813), pp. 62-63. For this reference, and for much additional information on the subject, I am indebted to Professor Fred Landon of the University of Western Ontario.
- 24. Narrative of Colonel Chewitt, Major Allan, et al., in Cruikshank, op. cit., p. 199. See also Judge William D. Powell's report to General Vincent, characterizing "some wretches of our own population, whose thirst for plunder was more alarming to the inhabitants than the presence of the enemy."—Ibid., p. 174.
- 25. See Cruikshank, op. cit., pp. 172-73 for both the appeal and the proclamation.
- 26. Further evidence of the factional discord at York is afforded by the contemporary American report that many inhabitants (evidently the anti-government party) entreated the army to remain in York and protect them from the "fury and persecution" of the royalists.—Letter to the Baltimore Whig, May 7, 1813, in Cruikshank, op. cit., p. 172.
- 27. A certain comic-relief is given to the entire precedings by the degree to which the Canadians browbeat and overawed the victorious commanders, who in

the main seemed more disposed to apologetic meekness than were the conquered townsmen.

28. The clearest, and only approximate eye-witness evidence on the burning of the Parliament houses is the testimony of Major Grafton of the United States Army. Seeing a "column of smoke" arising at a distance of two hundred or three hundred paces, he immediately rode forward and witnessed flames bursting from the windows of a low, one-story building: "I enquired," he continues, "of the citizens who had collected, and were quietly looking on, how the fire had originated, and what building that was? They said it was called the Parliament House, but could not say how it had occurred. At this time there was not in sight an American soldier."—Niles Register, IX (November 4, 1815), 161-62.

Illustrative of the attitude of British military officials, an heroic life-size portrait of Rear-Admiral Cockburn was painted in 1819, showing in the background a city in flames. Frary, who reproduces it in They Built the Capitol, observes: "The drawing of the buildings is so accurate that it is evident sketches must have been made by some officer who was on the scene. Even the long corridor connecting the two wings [of the Capitol] is evident."

- 29. Some Canadian writers state that these supplies largely fell into unworthy hands. Since Dearborn gave them to "the overseers of the poor of the town" (his letter of November 11, 1814) the Americans can hardly be held responsible for this.
- 30. Illustrative of similar conduct, General Procter on withdrawing from Amherstburg and Detroit in September, 1813 blew up or otherwise destroyed as much of the public works and property as he could.
 - 31. In Niles Register, IX, 160.
 - 32. In Cruikshank, op. cit., p. 200.
 - 33. In so doing he followed an illustrious exemplar,

for he had served under Lord Nelson at Copenhagen, who had employed the same threat against the Danes.

34. General Dearborn several times repudiated the accusations of American misconduct at York, most fully and notably in his communication published in *Niles Register*, IX, 159-62. In the Dearborn letter book in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library is still another exposition of the subject. Although its contents are necessarily similar to the other statements made by the General, it is appended here, as a suitable postlude to the subject under discussion:

Boston Nov. 11th 1814

Sirs

I have this morning been honored with your letter of the 5th instant and I hasten to give the Committee an explicit and I trust a satisfactory answer—

At the attack and capture of York in Upper Canada and while the troops under my command continued in possession of the place, no buildings either public or private were destroyed either by my order or otherwise by the army or navy to my knowledge, excepting two military block houses and two or three sheds attached to the Navy yard-I had a strong guard posted in the town for the express purpose of preventing any plundering or abuse of the inhabitants or destruction of property. There was, [sic] however, two or three instances of complaints by persons residing out of the village of having been plundered by our soldiers. They were directed to make out accounts of the articles taken from them with their value and such accounts were accordingly presented & paid, for which I hold receipts-One schooner said to be private property which was on shore & filled with water could not be got off I had appraised at 12,000 dollars and paid for accordingly & then she was burnt. Such military stores and provisions as were not destroyed by the enemy were taken on board Commodore Chauncey's fleet, excepting a considerable quantity of flour and other articles of provision which I caused to be delivered to

several poor destitute families and to the overseers of the poor of the town-When our troops had beaten the enemy at and near the place of landing and had taken several of his batteries and were approaching the main works, the enemy made a rapid retreat and set fire to his principal magazine containing about 500 barrels of powder. The explosion killed and wounded about 200 of our men including that excellent officer Brigr. Genl. Pike. The most valuable barracks & quarters for officers being very near the magazine were destroyed by the explosion; and subsequent to the surrender of the place & troops in town, the frigate on the stocks & a large store house containing the whole of the naval stores for the frigate, &c were set on fire by the enemy, altho he had agreed to surrender the troops in town with the whole of the public property. The effect of the explosion on our troops, with the burning of the ship and store house as before stated might have justified some severity on our part, but the conduct of the troops while in and about the town was such as produced a letter from Chief Justice Scott when we were about leaving the place acknowledging our humane behaviour towards the inhabitants with particular thanks for the protection afforded to their persons and property—Such of the barracks as escaped the effect of the explosion of the magazine were left entire. A human scalp being found suspended near the Speaker's seat in what was called the province house. (which I now have in possession) might have operated as an excuse for burning the building, but I strictly forbade any burning excepting such as I have already mentioned, and no other building was burned or destroyed to my knowledge nor did I ever hear of the burning of the province house before I left my command in Canada-I do not recollect hearing of any complaint from the inhabitants of Canada while I had the command on the frontier of any burning or destroying of buildings by our troops, nor do I recollect ever hearing of any such acts excepting the case at Fort George when the barracks and block houses in and about the fort were destroyed by hot shot at the

time of the attack—Of any acts of burning by our troops subsequent to my leaving the command of District No 9 I can only observe that a rumour was in circulation of the burning of some building or buildings at York by a detachment of our fleet and army in which Col. Scott, now General Scott, had a command—A report of that expedition was probably made to the departments of War & Navy. Genl. Scott can undoubtedly give the Committee satisfactory information in relation to the rumour I have alluded to.

Signed/H. DEARBORN

The Committee

Commodore Chauncey's report of this second attack on York, July 31, 1813, is in *Niles Register*, VIII, 36. It shows that the public storehouses were burned and their contents either destroyed or carried away.

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